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SUBJECT: AKP GOES TO THE BENCH IN BURSA LOCAL ELECTIONS

11. Summary. Hikmet Sahin, the current Mayor of the Greater Bursa Municipality, Turkey's fourth largest city, never hit it off, either with the people of Bursa or with the leadership of his party, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Accordingly, AKP has decided not to renominate him for mayor in March's local elections, choosing instead the equally well-known and much more dynamic District Mayor Recep Altepe. Relegated to running as the Democratic Party (DP) candidate, Sahin currently lags behind "undecided" in local polls. Sena Kaleli, the nominee of the Republican People's Party (CHP), has no political experience and inadequate funding, and is notable primarily for being the only female candidate for municipal mayor in the entire country. Better organized and funded, and with a long list of achievements from his term as district mayor, Altepe is heavily favored to secure the municipal mayorship. End summary.

60,000 Jobs in Bursa Lost To The Economic Crisis

12. Bursa Greater Municipality, capital of the Turkish province of the same name, is situated some 30 miles to the southeast of Istanbul, at the eastern end of the Sea of Marmara. The city was founded by Philip of Macedon, became the first capital of the Ottoman Empire in 1326, and was for centuries the western terminus of the Silk Road. With a population of 2.5 million, it is Turkey's fourth largest city. Its economy revolves around automobile manufacturing and parts, textiles, and food. Closely integrated into the world economy, Bursa has suffered significantly in the recent global crisis, with some 60,000 jobs lost since the crisis hit Turkey late last fall. However, according to Provincial Governor Sahabettin Harput, the effects of these layoffs have been alleviated by long-term unemployment insurance and additional government benefits to businesses that permit them to offer employees part-time work. In our meetings with MUSIAD and BUGIAD, two local affiliates of nationwide business organizations, their members uniformly expressed confidence in the ability of the city to rebound from the crisis, beginning as early as the second half of this year.

Current Mayor Seeks the Silver Lining

13. Hikmet Sahin is ending his first term as greater municipal mayor. According to news reports, AKP decided not to renominate him because of bad blood between Sahin and the Labor Minister. A senior business contact in Bursa told us he believes one reason the AKP has dumped Sahin is that he isn't sufficiently conservative. Challenger Recep Altepe -- who has a covered wife and currently represents one of the

most conservative districts of Bursa -- offered a different explanation: Sahin is not from the Bursa area and never ingratiated himself with the locals, did not approach his job as a "team player" (a very serious failing within the AKP), and did not accomplish much. Indeed, during our meeting Sahin spoke little and vaguely of his own election plans, and seemed to have resigned himself to a loss, saying only that his campaign would help DP candidates for city council (currently controlled by AKP, with 55 percent of the seats).

AKP Candidate Has Good Reason to be Confident

¶4. Recep Altepe is the mayor of Osmangazi, the largest of the seven districts within Greater Bursa Municipality, and in our meeting he was the exact opposite of Sahin -- voluble, energetic and confident. He claimed that AKP's choice of him as its municipal mayor candidate was due more to current mayor Sahin's unpopularity than to his own popularity. According to Altepe, polls (commissioned by AKP) show 55 percent of voters supporting AKP; 16-17 percent supporting CHP; 10-12 percent supporting the right-wing National Action Party (whose candidate refused to meet with us); 8-9 percent undecided; and 5-6 percent supporting Sahin. These figures are in line with AKP's results in the 2004 local elections (48 percent) and 2007 general elections (51 percent). Altepe says AKP's target is sixty percent of the vote.

¶5. Altepe recounted his many accomplishments -- 750 projects with a value of 250 million Turkish lira, including municipal buildings, health clinics, sports facilities and parks.

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Altepe noted with pride that in these efforts he had over 300 "project partners" -- e.g., NGOs, architects and universities. Altepe said that he intends to make Bursa an international conference center competitive with Istanbul, and noted that eight luxury hotels are under construction. To illustrate his points, throughout the meeting Altepe handed us brochures, booklets and hardcover books (one a 300 page long history of one of Osmangazi's neighborhoods), all published by the district government.

CHP Candidate Attacks the Glass Ceiling

¶6. CHP candidate Sena Kaleli is the principal owner and manager of Kamil Koc, the oldest bus company in Turkey and one of the 500 largest companies in Turkey. She told us that while she had in the past been approached by AKP to run for office, she had demurred, feeling that she would only be "window dressing." However, when approached last year by CHP she decided to act, spurred by its support of individual freedoms and women's rights. (She claims -- somewhat surreally -- that a CHP government would "absolutely" be more pro-western than an AKP government.) Although she is a champion of women's rights, she said that she was not chosen by CHP because she was a woman but because she is well-known. She is the only woman candidate from any party running for greater municipal mayor, she said. Yet, when CHP ran a poll asking if voters would vote for a woman, 80 percent said they would.

¶7. Kaleli's strategy will be to "reach out" and be more inclusive -- a strategy that AKP has from its inception wielded with much success, but one which only recently has the notoriously-insular CHP begun to adopt. She also intends (like most opposition candidates to whom we have spoken) to hammer away at corruption within the AKP. She acknowledges, however, a severe disparity in financial capabilities between CHP and AKP, and says that Altepe is so confident of victory that he didn't participate in a candidate's debate sponsored by a local television station. Some measure of the struggle CHP will have in being heard is the huge Altepe campaign

poster decorating the bus stop in front of CHP headquarters. Bursa is festooned in those posters -- illegally, says CHP, since the official campaign period does not begin until March 19. Legal or not, they well illustrate the financial advantages held by AKP.

Meeting With Saadet: Party Typically Lively

18. Saadet party contacts told us that in past elections voters supported AKP because it promised a good economy and more religious freedom, both of which it has failed to deliver. Since Saadet can provide what AKP only promises, voters will abandon AKP in favor of Saadet. The party has, they claim, been reinvigorated by its new leadership (incoming president Prof. Dr. Numan Kurtulmus has a PhD from Cornell University) and party leaders expect it will do quite well in the local elections -- 13 percent overall in Bursa, and possibly even a district mayorship.

Comment: AKP Bench Too Deep to Overcome

19. Given the current mayor's unpopularity and the economic crisis gripping the region, Bursa would seem to be a city in play. Yet, AKP's bench is so deep that even its substitute candidate is substantially stronger than those offered up by the opposition parties. This means that, in Bursa, AKP is essentially running against itself. It expects to do better than the 51 percent it received in the 2007 elections, and if it does not at least come very close to that figure, will rightfully be considered to have suffered something of a loss. However, despite a grinding recession, the lack of a viable alternative means that AKP is likely to prevail yet again.
Wiener